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THE SCIENTIFIC STUDY OF HUMAN BIOGRAPHY

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THE students of the historical, humanistic, social and physical sciences are united in a common interest in human biography. They want to understand the factors which favor high productivity in philosophic speculation, scientific investigation, literary creation, economic enterprise and political management. They would like to know how, within the same field of activity, "temperamental" and "environmental" influences combine to produce different constellations of traits and interests. The ever-present problem is to account for the appearance of and the differences manifest in Shakespeare and Goethe, Descartes and Kant, Newton and Einstein, Bismarck and Napoleon. Or, more generally, the task is to isolate the operative factors in the determination of typical views of the world and typical levels of creative activity.¹

Many streams of investigation have convincingly shown that a human life, viewed at any given cross-section, is the outcome of formative factors of many kinds. The cultural *milieu* leaves its mark on the speech, morals, manners, tastes, ambitions and loyalties of the individual. The phantasy life of the person gives him a private world which distinguishes him from his fellows in the same cultural environment. No individual can be completely defined as the phenomenon observable at the intersection of culture planes; it is a commonplace that members of the same family, exposed to the same religious, racial, partisan, national, educational and occupational influences, display wide differences in traits and interests. The

¹ One may refer in passing to the work of Dilthey, Spranger, Klages, Jaspers and their circles in this connection.

physiological and anatomical make-up shows several typical deviations within the range of the "normal."² Differences in glandular function may make puberty crises, menstrual cycles and climacteric changes more serious for one than another. Physiological and anatomical facts, such as shortness or tallness, fatness or thinness, may expose the person to respect or contempt in specific cultures.³ The neurological and intellectual coordinations of individuals differ very markedly from one another. There are important differences in such fundamental processes as those of perception, some individuals retaining eidetic imagery throughout their adult lives. Pathological elements in the ordinary organic processes are not to be underestimated. Some types of disorder bring ascertainable consequences for the efficiency, mood and preoccupation of the victims. The pathological changes associated with senility are especially significant in politics, where old men occupy high diplomatic, administrative, legislative and judicial posts. The psychopathological disturbances are particularly prominent in many active and productive lives. Medical psychology has recently come to stress the importance of repressions in the production of neurotic symptoms, neurotic character traits, psychotic symptoms and perversions.⁴

² A readable, succinct summary is that of E. Miller, "Types of Mind and Body," New York, 1927.

³ H. Hoffman has outlined a method of approach to the study of heredity factors in his "Das Problem des Charakteraufbaus," Berlin, 1926.

⁴ An evaluation of existing personality documents is in my article, "The Problem of Adequate Personality Records: A Proposal," *American Journal of Psychiatry*, May, 1929.

That the writing of human biography is in an unsatisfactory plight is manifest in the omissions and mistakes which are to be found in the current output. In the universities, human biographies continue to be written under the sole jurisdiction of separate departments, often ignoring the interpretative concepts which are successfully used by men in other departments of the same institution, or applying them in amateurish fashion as mere figures of speech. This is especially the fate of such psychopathological terms as "complex," "repression," "sublimation," "compensation."

The obvious escape from the difficulties of the present situation is by way of a procedure which familiarizes the apprentice biographer with the chief technical tools of the major fields which converge upon the interpretation of human reactions, and to give him the benefit of sustained technical criticism in applying them to a definite case.

It is scarcely feasible for the student to shop around among the departments of internal medicine, neurology, psychiatry and psychopathology, psychology, anatomy and physiology, besides the departments of social science, history and the humanities of the university. If the student attends clinical demonstrations in internal medicine he may learn something about the symptoms of many diseases, but all that is directly valuable to him is the recognition of those disease conditions which have been demonstrated to have special effects upon the mental state of the sufferer. Such correlations emerge as medical psychology develops. It should be possible to render the current data readily accessible through lectures, demonstrations and bibliographies. Moving-picture films

may be developed to show how the diagnosis is made, and the psychological effects of the disease upon the patient.

The prominence which has been given to pathological and physical scientific conceptions in this brief statement does not mean that the chief aim of biography is to become pathography. Of pathographies there are many, since Möbius introduced some discipline into the field.⁵ Biography is a larger field, requiring the analysis and resynthesis of the significant features in the individual's total history.

The central nucleus of those interested in the problem of more adequate human biographies might very well constitute themselves into an institute of human biography, composed of a historian, sociologist, political scientist, economist, jurist, humanist, historian of science, historian of philosophy, psychiatrist and psychopathologist, doctor of internal medicine, geneticist and psychometrician. Temporary consultants could be attached to the central nucleus as specific studies warranted.

Since the modern university makes so many demands upon the time of its members, any task which is not institutionalized is prone to be neglected. It is therefore desirable that the chief centers of learning both here and abroad develop mechanisms of the type proposed. Each individual institute might guide the research of both pre- and post-doctoral workers.

If the retrospective interpretation of men's lives is to be kept abreast of specialized scientific progress, the development of such a converging attack seems to be imperative.

⁵ See the recent summary of this entire literature by Wilhelm Lange-Eichbaum, "Genio-Irrsin und Ruhm," München, 1928.